Midnight Sun

Edward's Story

by

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1. First Sight

This was the time of day when I wished I were able to sleep.

High school.

Or was purgatory the right word? If there *was* any way to atone for my sins, this ought to count toward the tally in some measure. The tedium was not something I grew used to; every day seemed more impossibly monotonous than the last.

I suppose this *was* my form of sleep—if sleep was defined as the inert state between active periods.

I stared at the cracks running through the plaster in the far corner of the cafeteria, imagining patterns into them that were not there. It was one way to tune out the voices that babbled like the gush of a river inside my head.

Several hundred of these voices I ignored out of boredom.

When it came to the human mind, I'd heard it all before and then some. Today, all thoughts were consumed with the trivial drama of a new addition to the small student body here. It took so little to work them all up. I'd seen the new face repeated in thought after thought from every angle. Just an ordinary human girl. The excitement over her arrival was tiresomely predictable—like flashing a shiny object at a child. Half the sheep-like males were already imagining themselves in love with her, just because she was something new to look at. I tried harder to tune them out.

Only four voices did I block out of courtesy rather than distaste: my family, my two brothers and two sisters, who were so used to the lack of privacy in my presence that they rarely gave it a thought. I gave them what privacy I could. I tried not to listen if I could help it.

Try as I may, still…I knew.

Rosalie was thinking, as usual, about herself. She'd caught sight of her profile in the reflection off someone's glasses, and she was mulling over her own perfection. Rosalie's mind was a shallow pool with few surprises.

Emmett was fuming over a wrestling match he'd lost to Jasper during the night. It would take all his limited patience to make it to the end of the school day to orchestrate a rematch. I never really felt intrusive hearing Emmett's thoughts, because he never thought one thing that he would not say aloud or put into action. Perhaps I only felt guilty reading the others' minds because I knew

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there were things there that they wouldn't want me to know. If Rosalie's mind was a shallow pool, then Emmett's was a lake with no shadows, glass clear.

And Jasper was…suffering. I suppressed a sigh.

Edward. Alice called my name in her head, and had my attention at once.

It was just the same as having my name called aloud. I was glad my given name had fallen out of style lately—it had been annoying; anytime anyone thought of any Edward, my head would turn automatically…

My head didn't turn now. Alice and I were good at these private conversations. It was rare that anyone caught us. I kept my eyes on the lines in the plaster.

How is he holding up? she asked me.

I frowned, just a small change in the set of my mouth. Nothing that would tip the others off. I could easily be frowning out of boredom.

Alice's mental tone was alarmed now, and I saw in her mind that she was watching Jasper in her peripheral vision. *Is there any danger?* She searched ahead, into the immediate future, skimming through visions of monotony for the source behind my frown.

I turned my head slowly to the left, as if looking at the bricks of the wall, sighed, and then to the right, back to the cracks in the ceiling. Only Alice knew I was shaking my head.

She relaxed. *Let me know if it gets too bad.*

I moved only my eyes, up to the ceiling above, and back down.

Thanks for doing this.

I was glad I couldn't answer her aloud. What would I say? 'My pleasure'? It was hardly that. I didn't enjoy listening to Jasper's struggles. Was it really necessary to experiment like this? Wouldn't the safer path be to just admit that he might never be able to handle the thirst the way the rest of us could, and not push his limits? Why flirt with disaster?

It had been two weeks since our last hunting trip. That was not an immensely difficult time span for the rest of us. A little uncomfortable occasionally—if a human walked too close, if the wind blew the wrong way. But humans rarely walked too close. Their instincts told them what their conscious minds would never understand: we were dangerous.

Jasper was very dangerous right now.

At that moment, a small girl paused at the end of the closest table to ours, stopping to talk to a friend. She tossed her short, sandy hair, running her fingers through it. The heaters blew her scent in our direction. I was used to the way that scent made me feel—the dry ache in my throat, the hollow yearn in my stomach, the automatic tightening of my muscles, the excess flow of venom in my mouth…

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This was all quite normal, usually easy to ignore. It was harder just now, with the feelings stronger, doubled, as I monitored Jasper's reaction. Twin thirsts, rather than just mine.

Jasper was letting his imagination get away from him. He was picturing it—picturing himself getting up from his seat next to Alice and going to stand beside the little girl. Thinking of leaning down and in, as if he were going to whisper in her ear, and letting his lips touch the arch of her throat. Imagining how the hot flow of her pulse beneath the fine skin would feel under his mouth…

I kicked his chair.

He met my gaze for a minute, and then looked down. I could hear shame and rebellion war in his head.

"Sorry," Jasper muttered.

I shrugged.

"You weren't going to do anything," Alice murmured to him, soothing his chagrin. "I could see that."

I fought back the grimace that would give her lie away. We had to stick together, Alice and I. It wasn't easy, hearing voices or seeing visions of the future. Both freaks among those who were already freaks. We protected each other's secrets.

"It helps a little if you think of them as people," Alice suggested, her high, musical voice too fast for human ears to understand, if any had been close enough to hear. "Her name is Whitney. She has a baby sister she adores. Her mother invited Esme to that garden party, do you remember?"

"I know who she is," Jasper said curtly. He turned away to stare out one of the small windows that were spaced just under the eaves around the long room. His tone ended the conversation.

He would have to hunt tonight. It was ridiculous to take risks like this, trying to test his strength, to build his endurance. Jasper should just accept his limitations and work within them. His former habits were not conducive to our chosen lifestyle; he shouldn't push himself in this way.

Alice sighed silently and stood, taking her tray of food—her prop, as it were—with her and leaving him alone. She knew when he'd had enough of her encouragement. Though Rosalie and Emmett were more flagrant about their relationship, it was Alice and Jasper who knew each other's every mood as well as their own. As if they could read minds, too—only just each other's.

Edward Cullen.

Reflex reaction. I turned to the sound of my name being called, though it wasn't being called, just thought.

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My eyes locked for a small portion of a second with a pair of wide, chocolate-brown human eyes set in a pale, heart-shaped face. I knew the face, though I'd never seen it myself before this moment. It had been foremost in every human head today. The new student, Isabella Swan. Daughter of the town's chief of police, brought to live here by some new custody situation. Bella. She'd corrected everyone who'd used her full name…

I looked away, bored. It took me a second to realize that she had not been the one to think my name.

Of course she's already crushing on the Cullens, I heard the first thought continue.

Now I recognized the 'voice.' Jessica Stanley—it had been a while since she'd bothered me with her internal chatter. What a relief it had been when she'd gotten over her misplaced infatuation. It used to be nearly impossible to escape her constant, ridiculous daydreams. I'd wished, at the time, that I could explain to her *exactly* what would have happened if my lips, and the teeth behind them, had gotten anywhere near her. That would have silenced those annoying fantasies. The thought of her reaction almost made me smile.

Fat lot of good it will do her, Jessica went on. *She's really not even pretty. I don't know why Eric is staring so much…or Mike.*

She winced mentally on the last name. Her new infatuation, the generically popular Mike Newton, was completely oblivious to her. Apparently, he was not as oblivious to the new girl. Like the child with the shiny object again. This put a mean edge to Jessica's thoughts, though she was outwardly cordial to the newcomer as she explained to her the commonly held knowledge about my family. The new student must have asked about us.

Everyone's looking at me today, too, Jessica thought smugly in an aside. *Isn't it lucky Bella had two classes with me…I'll bet Mike will want to ask me what she's—*

I tried to block the inane chatter out of my head before the petty and the trivial could drive me mad.

"Jessica Stanley is giving the new Swan girl all the dirty laundry on the Cullen clan," I murmured to Emmett as a distraction.

He chuckled under his breath. *I hope she's making it good,* he thought.

"Rather unimaginative, actually. Just the barest hint of scandal. Not an ounce of horror. I'm a little disappointed."

And the new girl? Is she disappointed in the gossip as well?

I listened to hear what this new girl, Bella, thought of Jessica's story. What did she see when she looked at the strange, chalky-skinned family that was universally avoided?

It was sort of my responsibility to know her reaction. I acted as a lookout, for lack of a better word, for my family. To protect us. If anyone ever grew

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suspicious, I could give us early warning and an easy retreat. It happened occasionally—some human with an active imagination would see in us the characters of a book or a movie. Usually they got it wrong, but it was better to move on somewhere new than to risk scrutiny. Very, very rarely, someone would guess right. We didn't give them a chance to test their hypothesis. We simply disappeared, to become no more than a frightening memory…

I heard nothing, though I listened close beside where Jessica's frivolous internal monologue continued to gush. It was as if there was no one sitting beside her. How peculiar, had the girl moved? That didn't seem likely, as Jessica was still babbling to her. I looked up to check, feeling off-balance. Checking on what my extra 'hearing' could tell me—it wasn't something I ever had to do.

Again, my gaze locked on those same wide brown eyes. She was sitting right where she had been before, and looking at us, a natural thing to be doing, I supposed, as Jessica was still regaling her with the local gossip about the Cullens.

Thinking about us, too, would be natural.

But I couldn't hear a whisper.

Inviting warm red stained her cheeks as she looked down, away from the embarrassing gaffe of getting caught staring at a stranger. It was good that Jasper was still gazing out the window. I didn't like to imagine what that easy pooling of blood would do to his control.

The emotions had been as clear on her face as if they were spelled out in words across her forehead: surprise, as she unknowingly absorbed the signs of the subtle differences between her kind and mine, curiosity, as she listened to Jessica's tale, and something more…fascination? It wouldn't be the first time. We were beautiful to them, our intended prey. Then, finally, embarrassment as I caught her staring at me.

And yet, though her thoughts had been so clear in her odd eyes—odd, because of the depth to them; brown eyes often seemed flat in their darkness—I could hear nothing but silence from the place she was sitting. Nothing at all.

I felt a moment of unease.

This was nothing I'd ever encountered before. Was there something wrong with me? I felt exactly the same as I always did. Worried, I listened harder.

All the voices I'd been blocking were suddenly shouting in my head.

…wonder what music she likes…maybe I could mention that new CD… Mike Newton was thinking, two tables away—fixated on Bella Swan.

Look at him staring at her. Isn't it enough that he has half the girls in school waiting for him to… Eric Yorkie was thinking sulfurous thoughts, also revolving around the girl.

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…so disgusting. You'd think she was famous or something… Even Edward Cullen, *staring…* Lauren Mallory was so jealous that her face, by all rights, should be dark jade in color. *And Jessica, flaunting her new best friend. What a joke…* Vitriol continued to spew from the girl's thoughts.

…I bet everyone has asked her that. But I'd like to talk to her. I'll think of a more original question… Ashley Dowling mused.

…maybe she'll be in my Spanish… June Richardson hoped.

…tons left to do tonight! Trig, and the English test. I hope my mom… Angela Weber, a quiet girl, whose thoughts were unusually kind, was the only one at the table who wasn't obsessed with this Bella.

I could hear them all, hear every insignificant thing they were thinking as it passed through their minds. But nothing at all from the new student with the deceptively communicative eyes.

And, of course, I could hear what the girl said when she spoke to Jessica. I didn't have to read minds to be able to hear her low, clear voice on the far side of the long room.

"Which one is the boy with the reddish brown hair?" I heard her ask, sneaking a look at me from the corner of her eye, only to look quickly away when she saw that I was still staring.

If I'd had time to hope that hearing the sound of her voice would help me pinpoint the tone of her thoughts, lost somewhere where I couldn't access them, I was instantly disappointed. Usually, people's thoughts came to them in a similar pitch as their physical voices. But this quiet, shy voice was unfamiliar, not one of the hundreds of thoughts bouncing around the room, I was sure of that. Entirely new.

Oh, good luck, idiot! Jessica thought before answering the girl's question. "That's Edward. He's gorgeous, of course, but don't waste your time. He doesn't date. Apparently none of the girls here are good-looking enough for him." She sniffed.

I turned my head away to hide my smile. Jessica and her classmates had no idea how lucky they were that none of them particularly appealed to me.

Beneath the transient humor, I felt a strange impulse, one I did not clearly understand. It had something to do with the vicious edge to Jessica's thoughts that the new girl was unaware of… I felt the strangest urge to step in between them, to shield this Bella Swan from the darker workings of Jessica's mind. What an odd thing to feel. Trying to ferret out the motivations behind the impulse, I examined the new girl one more time.

Perhaps it was just some long buried protective instinct—the strong for the weak. This girl looked more fragile than her new classmates. Her skin was so translucent it was hard to believe it offered her much defense from the outside

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world. I could see the rhythmic pulse of blood through her veins under the clear, pale membrane… But I should not concentrate on that. I was good at this life I'd chosen, but I was just as thirsty as Jasper and there was no point in inviting temptation.

There was a faint crease between her eyebrows that she seemed unaware of.

It was unbelievable frustrating! I could clearly see that it was a strain for her to sit there, to make conversation with strangers, to be the center of attention. I could sense her shyness from the way she held her frail-looking shoulders, slightly hunched, as if she was expecting a rebuff at any moment. And yet I could only sense, could only see, could only imagine. There was nothing but silence from the very unexceptional human girl. I could hear nothing. Why?

"Shall we?" Rosalie murmured, interrupting my focus.

I looked away from the girl with a sense of relief. I didn't want to continue to fail at this—it irritated me. And I didn't want to develop any interest in her hidden thoughts simply because they were hidden from me. No doubt, when I did decipher her thoughts—and I *would* find a way to do so—they would be just as petty and trivial as any human's thoughts. Not worth the effort I would expend to reach them.

"So, is the new one afraid of us yet?" Emmett asked, still waiting for my response to his question before.

I shrugged. He wasn't interested enough to press for a more information. Nor should I be interested.

We got up from the table and walked out of the cafeteria.

Emmett, Rosalie, and Jasper were pretending to be seniors; they left for their classes. I was playing a younger role than they. I headed off for my junior level biology class, preparing my mind for the tedium. It was doubtful Mr. Banner, a man of no more than average intellect, would manage to pull out anything in his lecture that would surprise someone holding two graduate degrees in medicine.

In the classroom, I settled into my chair and let my books—props, again; they held nothing I didn't already know—spill across the table. I was the only student who had a table to himself. The humans weren't smart enough to *know* that they feared me, but their survival instincts were enough to keep them away.

The room slowly filled as they trickled in from lunch. I leaned back in my chair and waited for the time to pass. Again, I wished I was able to sleep.

Because I'd been thinking about her, when Angela Weber escorted the new girl through the door, her name intruded on my attention.

Bella seems just as shy as me. I'll bet today is really hard for her. I wish I could say something…but it would probably just sound stupid…

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Yes! Mike Newton thought, turning in his seat to watch the girls enter.

Still, from the place where Bella Swan stood, nothing. The empty space where her thoughts should be irritated and unnerved me.

She came closer, walking down the aisle beside me to get to the teacher's desk. Poor girl; the seat next to me was the only one available. Automatically, I cleared what would be her side of the desk, shoving my books into a pile. I doubted she would feel very comfortable there. She was in for a long semester—in this class, at least. Perhaps, though, sitting beside her, I'd be able to flush out her secrets…not that I'd ever needed close proximity before…not that I would find anything worth listening to…

Bella Swan walked into the flow of the heated air that blew toward me from the vent.

Her scent hit me like wrecking ball, like a battering ram. There was no image violent enough to encapsulate the force of what happened to me in that moment.

In that instant, I was nothing close to the human I'd once been; no trace of the shreds of humanity I'd managed to cloak myself in remained.

I was a predator. She was my prey. There was nothing else in the whole world but that truth.

There was no room full of witnesses—they were already collateral damage in my head. The mystery of her thoughts was forgotten. Her thoughts meant nothing, for she would not go on thinking them much longer.

I was a vampire, and she had the sweetest blood I'd smelled in eighty years.

I hadn't imagined such a scent could exist. If I'd known it did, I would have gone searching for it long ago. I would have combed the planet for her. I could imagine the taste…

Thirst burned through my throat like fire. My mouth was baked and desiccated. The fresh flow of venom did nothing to dispel that sensation. My stomach twisted with the hunger that was an echo of the thirst. My muscles coiled to spring.

Not a full second had passed. She was still taking the same step that had put her downwind from me.

As her foot touched the ground, her eyes slid toward me, a movement she clearly meant to be stealthy. Her glance met mine, and I saw myself reflected in the wide mirror of her eyes.

The shock of the face I saw there saved her life for a few thorny moments.

She didn't make it easier. When she processed the expression on my face, blood flooded her cheeks again, turning her skin the most delicious color I'd ever

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seen. The scent was a thick haze in my brain. I could barely think through it. My thoughts raged, resisting control, incoherent.

She walked more quickly now, as if she understood the need to escape. Her haste made her clumsy—she tripped and stumbled forward, almost falling into the girl seated in front of me. Vulnerable, weak. Even more than usual for a human.

I tried to focus on the face I'd seen in her eyes, a face I recognized with revulsion. The face of the monster in me—the face I'd beaten back with decades of effort and uncompromising discipline. How easily it sprang to the surface now!

The scent swirled around me again, scattering my thoughts and nearly propelling me out of my seat.

No.

My hand gripped under the edge of the table as I tried to hold myself in my chair. The wood was not up to the task. My hand crushed through the strut and came away with a palmful of splintered pulp, leaving the shape of my fingers carved into the remaining wood.

Destroy evidence. That was a fundamental rule. I quickly pulverized the edges of the shape with my fingertips, leaving nothing but a ragged hole and a pile of shavings on the floor, which I scattered with my foot.

Destroy evidence. Collateral damage….

I knew what had to happen now. The girl would have to come sit beside me, and I would have to kill her.

The innocent bystanders in this classroom, eighteen other children and one man, could not be allowed to leave this room, having seen what they would soon see.

I flinched at the thought of what I must do. Even at my very worst, I had never committed this kind of atrocity. I had never killed innocents, not in over eight decades. And now I planned to slaughter twenty of them at once.

The face of the monster in the mirror mocked me.

Even as part of me shuddered away from the monster, another part was planning it.

If I killed the girl first, I would have only fifteen or twenty seconds with her before the humans in the room would react. Maybe a little bit longer, if at first they did not realize what I was doing. She would not have time to scream or feel pain; I would not kill her cruelly. That much I could give this stranger with her horribly desirable blood.

But then I would have to stop them from escaping. I wouldn't have to worry about the windows, too high up and small to provide an escape for anyone. Just the door—block that and they were trapped.

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It would be slower and more difficult, trying to take them all down when they were panicked and scrambling, moving in chaos. Not impossible, but there would be much more noise. Time for lots of screaming. Someone would hear…and I'd be forced to kill even more innocents in this black hour.

And her blood would cool, while I murdered the others.

The scent punished me, closing my throat with dry aching…

So the witnesses first then.

I mapped it out in my head. I was in the middle of the room, the furthest row in the back. I would take my right side first. I could snap four or five of their necks per second, I estimated. It would not be noisy. The right side would be the lucky side; they would not see me coming. Moving around the front and back up the left side, it would take me, at most, five seconds to end every life in this room.

Long enough for Bella Swan to see, briefly, what was coming for her. Long enough for her to feel fear. Long enough, maybe, if shock didn't freeze her in place, for her to work up a scream. One soft scream that would not bring anyone running.

I took a deep breath, and the scent was a fire that raced through my dry veins, burning out from my chest to consume every better impulse that I was capable of.

She was just turning now. In a few seconds, she would sit down inches away from me.

The monster in my head smiled in anticipation.

Someone slammed shut a folder on my left. I didn't look up to see which of the doomed humans it was. But the motion sent a wave of ordinary, unscented air wafting across my face.

For one short second, I was able to think clearly. In that precious second, I saw two faces in my head, side by side.

One was mine, or rather had been: the red-eyed monster that had killed so many people that I'd stop counting their numbers. Rationalized, justified murders. A killer of killers, a killer of other, less powerful monsters. It was a god complex, I acknowledged that—deciding who deserved a death sentence. It was a compromise with myself. I had fed on human blood, but only by the loosest definition. My victims were, in their various dark pastimes, barely more human than I was.

The other face was Carlisle's.

There was no resemblance between the two faces. They were bright day and blackest night.

There was no reason for there to be a resemblance. Carlisle was not my father in the basic biological sense. We shared no common features. The

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similarity in our coloring was a product of what we were; every vampire had the same ice pale skin. The similarity in the color of our eyes was another matter—a reflection of a mutual choice.

And yet, though there was no basis for a resemblance, I'd imagined that my face had begun to reflect his, to an extent, in the last seventy-odd years that I had embraced his choice and followed in his steps. My features had not changed, but it seemed to me like some of his wisdom had marked my expression, that a little of his compassion could be traced in the shape of my mouth, and hints of his patience were evident on my brow.

All those tiny improvements were lost in the face of the monster. In a few moments, there would be nothing left in me that would reflect the years I'd spent with my creator, my mentor, my father in all the ways that counted. My eyes would glow red as a devil's; all likeness would be lost forever.

In my head, Carlisle's kind eyes did not judge me. I knew that he would forgive me for this horrible act that I would do. Because he loved me. Because he thought I was better than I was. And he would still love me, even as I now proved him wrong.

Bella Swan sat down in the chair next to me, her movements stiff and awkward—with fear?—and the scent of her blood bloomed in an inexorable cloud around me.

I would prove my father wrong about me. The misery of this fact hurt almost as much as the fire in my throat.

I leaned away from her in revulsion—revolted by the monster aching to take her.

Why did she have to come here? Why did she have to exist? Why did she have to ruin the little peace I had in this non-life of mine? Why had this aggravating human ever been born? She would ruin me.

I turned my face away from her, as a sudden fierce, unreasoning hatred washed through me.

Who *was* this creature? Why me, why now? Why did I have to lose everything just because she happened to choose this unlikely town to appear in?

Why had she come here!

I didn't want to be the monster! I didn't want to kill this room full of harmless children! I didn't want to lose everything I'd gained in a lifetime of sacrifice and denial!

I wouldn't. She couldn't make me.

The scent was the problem, the hideously appealing scent of her blood. If there was only some way to resist…if only another gust of fresh air could clear my head.

Bella Swan shook out her long, thick, mahogany hair in my direction.

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Was she insane? It was as if she were encouraging the monster! Taunting him.

There was no friendly breeze to blow the smell away from me now. All would soon be lost.

No, there was no helpful breeze. But I didn't *have* to breathe.

I stopped the flow of air through my lungs; the relief was instantaneous, but incomplete. I still had the memory of the scent in my head, the taste of it on the back of my tongue. I wouldn't be able to resist even that for long. But perhaps I could resist for an hour. One hour. Just enough time to get out of this room full of victims, victims that maybe didn't have to *be* victims. If I could resist for one short hour.

It was an uncomfortable feeling, not breathing. My body did not need oxygen, but it went against my instincts. I relied on scent more than my other senses in times of stress. It led the way in the hunt, it was the first warning in case of danger. I did not often came across something as dangerous as I was, but self-preservation was just as strong in my kind as it was in the average human.

Uncomfortable, but manageable. More bearable than smelling *her* and not sinking my teeth through that fine, thin, see-through skin to the hot, wet, pulsing—

An hour! Just one hour. I must not think of the scent, the taste.

The silent girl kept her hair between us, leaning forward so that it spilled across her folder. I couldn't see her face, to try to read the emotions in her clear, deep eyes. Was this why she'd let her tresses fan out between us? To hide those eyes from me? Out of fear? Shyness? To keep her secrets from me?

My former irritation at being stymied by her soundless thoughts was weak and pale in comparison to the need—and the hate—that possessed me now. For I hated this frail woman-child beside me, hated her with all the fervor with which I clung to my former self, my love of my family, my dreams of being something better than what I was… Hating her, hating how she made me feel—it helped a little. Yes, the irritation I'd felt before was weak, but it, too, helped a little. I clung to any emotion that distracted me from imagining what she would *taste* like…

Hate and irritation. Impatience. Would the hour never pass?

And when the hour ended… Then she would walk out of this room. And I would do what?

I could introduce myself. *Hello, my name is Edward Cullen. May I walk you to your next class?*

She would say yes. It would be the polite thing to do. Even already fearing me, as I suspected she did, she would follow convention and walk beside me. It should be easy enough to lead her in the wrong direction. A spur of the

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forest reached out like a finger to touch the back corner of the parking lot. I could tell her I'd forgotten a book in my car…

Would anyone notice that I was the last person she'd been seen with? It was raining, as usual; two dark raincoats heading the wrong direction wouldn't pique too much interest, or give me away.

Except that I was not the only student who was aware of her today—though no one was as blisteringly aware as I was. Mike Newton, in particular, was conscious of every shift in her weight as she fidgeted in her chair—she was uncomfortable so close to me, just as anyone would be, just as I'd expected before her scent had destroyed all charitable concern. Mike Newton would notice if she left the classroom with me.

If I could last an hour, could I last two?

I flinched at the pain of the burning.

She would go home to an empty house. Police Chief Swan worked a full day. I knew his house, as I knew every house in the tiny town. His home was nestled right up against thick woods, with no close neighbors. Even if she had time to scream, which she would not, there would be no one to hear.

That would be the responsible way to deal with this. I'd gone seven decades without human blood. If I held my breath, I could last two hours. And when I had her alone, there would be no chance of anyone else getting hurt. *And no reason to rush through the experience*, the monster in my head agreed.

It was sophistry to think that by saving the nineteen humans in this room with effort and patience, I would be less a monster when I killed this innocent girl.

Though I hated her, I knew my hatred was unjust. I knew that what I really hated was myself. And I would hate us both so much more when she was dead.

I made it through the hour in this way—imagining the best ways to kill her. I tried to avoid imagining the actual *act*. That might be too much for me; I might lose this battle and end up killing everyone in sight. So I planned strategy, and nothing more. It carried me through the hour.

Once, toward the very end, she peeked up at me through the fluid wall of her hair. I could feel the unjustified hatred burning out of me as I met her gaze—see the reflection of it in her frightened eyes. Blood painted her cheek before she could hide in her hair again, and I was nearly undone.

But the bell rang. Saved by the bell—how cliché. We were both saved. She, saved from death. I, saved for just a short time from being the nightmarish creature I feared and loathed.

I couldn't walk as slowly as I should as I darted from the room. If anyone had been looking at me, they might have suspected that there was something not

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right about the way I moved. No one was paying attention to me. All human thoughts still swirled around the girl who was condemned to die in little more than an hour's time.

I hid in my car.

I didn't like to think of myself having to hide. How cowardly that sounded. But it was unquestionably the case now.

I didn't have enough discipline left to be around humans now. Focusing so much of my efforts on not killing *one* of them left me no resources to resist the others. What a waste that would be. If I were to give in to the monster, I might as well make it worth the defeat.

I played a CD of music that usually calmed me, but it did little for me now. No, what helped most now was the cool, wet, clean air that drifted with the light rain through my open windows. Though I could remember the scent of Bella Swan's blood with perfect clarity, inhaling the clean air was like washing out the inside of my body from its infection.

I was sane again. I could think again. And I could fight again. I could fight against what I didn't want to be.

I didn't have to go to her home. I didn't have to kill her. Obviously, I was a rational, thinking creature, and I had a choice. There was always a choice.

It hadn't felt that way in the classroom…but I was away from her now. Perhaps, if I avoided her very, very carefully, there was no need for my life to change. I had things ordered the way I liked them now. Why should I let some aggravating and delicious nobody ruin that?

I didn't *have* to disappoint my father. I didn't have to cause my mother stress, worry…pain. Yes, it would hurt my adopted mother, too. And Esme was so gentle, so tender and soft. Causing someone like Esme pain was truly inexcusable.

How ironic that I'd wanted to protect this human girl from the paltry, toothless threat of Jessica Stanley's snide thoughts. I was the last person who would ever stand as a protector for Isabella Swan. She would never need protection from anything more than she needed it from me.

Where was Alice, I suddenly wondered? Hadn't she seen me killing the Swan girl in a multitude of ways? Why hadn't she come to help—to stop me or help me clean up the evidence, whichever? Was she so absorbed with watching for trouble with Jasper that she'd missed this much more horrific possibility? Was I stronger than I thought? Would I really not have done anything to the girl?

No. I knew that wasn't true. Alice must be concentrating on Jasper very hard.

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I searched in the direction I knew she would be, in the small building used for English classes. It did not take me long to locate her familiar 'voice.' And I was right. Her every thought was turned to Jasper, watching his small choices with minute scrutiny.

I wished I could ask her advice, but at the same time, I was glad she didn't know what I was capable of. That she was unaware of the massacre I had considered in the last hour.

I felt a new burn through my body—the burn of shame. I didn't want any of them to know.

If I could avoid Bella Swan, if I could manage not to kill her—even as I thought that, the monster writhed and gnashed his teeth in frustration—then no one would have to know. If I could keep away from her scent…

There was no reason why I shouldn't try, at least. Make a good choice. Try to be what Carlisle thought I was.

The last hour of school was almost over. I decided to put my new plan into action at once. Better than sitting here in the parking lot where she might pass me and ruin my attempt. Again, I felt the unjust hatred for the girl. I hated that she had this unconscious power over me. That she could make me be something I reviled.

I walked swiftly—a little too swiftly, but there were no witnesses—across the tiny campus to the office. There was no reason for Bella Swan to cross paths with me. She would be avoided like the plague she was.

The office was empty except for the secretary, the one I wanted to see.

She didn't notice my silent entrance.

"Mrs. Cope?"

The woman with the unnaturally red hair looked up and her eyes widened. It always caught them off guard, the little markers they didn't understand, no matter how many times they'd seen one of us before.

"Oh," she gasped, a little flustered. She smoothed her shirt. *Silly,* she thought to herself. *He's almost young enough to be my son. Too young to think of that way…* "Hello, Edward. What can I do for you?" Her eyelashes fluttered behind her thick glasses.

Uncomfortable. But I knew how to be charming when I wanted to be. It was easy, since I was able to know instantly how any tone or gesture was taken.

I leaned forward, meeting her gaze as if I were staring deeply into her depthless, small brown eyes. Her thoughts were already in a flutter. This should be simple.

"I was wondering if you could help me with my schedule," I said in the soft voice I reserved for not scaring humans.

I heard the tempo of her heart increase.

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"Of course, Edward. How can I help?" *Too young, too young,* she chanted to herself. Wrong, of course. I was older than her grandfather. But according to my driver's license, she was right.

"I was wondering if I could move from my biology class to a senior level science? Physics, perhaps?"

"It there a problem with Mr. Banner, Edward?"

"Not at all, it's just that I've already studied this material…"

"In that accelerated school you all went to in Alaska, right." Her thin lips pursed as she considered this. *They should all be in college. I've heard the teachers complain. Perfect four point ohs, never a hesitation with a response, never a wrong answer on a test—like they've found some way to cheat in every subject. Mr. Varner would rather believe that anyone was cheating than think a student was smarter than him… I'll bet their mother tutors them…* "Actually, Edward, physics is pretty much full right now. Mr. Banner hates to have more than twenty-five students in a class—"

"I wouldn't be any trouble."

Of course not. Not a perfect Cullen. "I know that, Edward. But there just aren't enough seats as it is…"

"Could I drop the class, then? I could use the period for independent study."

"Drop biology?" He mouth fell open. *That's crazy. How hard is it to sit through a subject you already know? There* must *be a problem with Mr. Banner. I wonder if I should talk to Bob about it?* "You won't have enough credits to graduate."

"I'll catch up next year."

"Maybe you should talk to your parents about that."

The door opened behind me, but who ever it was did not think of me, so I ignored the arrival and concentrated on Mrs. Cope. I leaned slightly closer, and held my eyes a little wider. This would work better if they were gold instead of black. The blackness frightened people, as it should.

"Please, Mrs. Cope?" I made my voice as smooth and compelling as it could be—and it could be considerably compelling. "Isn't there some other section I could switch to? I'm sure there has to be an open slot somewhere? Sixth hour biology can't be the only option…"

I smiled at her, careful not to flash my teeth so widely that it would scare her, letting the expression soften my face.

Her heart drummed faster. *Too young,* she reminded herself frantically. "Well, maybe I could talk to Bob—I mean Mr. Banner. I could see if—"

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A second was all it took to change everything: the atmosphere in the room, my mission here, the reason I leaned toward the red-haired woman… What had been for one purpose before was now for another.

A second was all it took for Samantha Wells to open the door and place a signed tardy slip in the basket by the door, and hurry out again, in a rush to be away from school. A second was all it took for the sudden gust of wind through the open door to crash into me. A second was all it took for me to realize why that first person through the door had not interrupted me with her thoughts.

I turned, though I did not need to make sure. I turned slowly, fighting to control the muscles that rebelled against me.

Bella Swan stood with her back pressed to the wall beside the door, a piece of paper clutched in her hands. Her eyes were even wider than usual as she took in my ferocious, inhuman glare.

The smell of her blood saturated every particle of air in the tiny, hot room. My throat burst into flames.

The monster glared back at me from the mirror of her eyes again, a mask of evil.

My hand hesitated in the air above the counter. I would not have to look back in order to reach across it and slam Mrs. Cope's head into her desk with enough force to kill her. Two lives, rather than twenty. A trade.

The monster waited anxiously, hungrily, for me to do it.

But there was always a choice—there *had* to be.

I cut off the motion of my lungs, and fixed Carlisle's face in front of my eyes. I turned back to face Mrs. Cope, and heard her internal surprise at the change in my expression. She shrank away from me, but her fear did not form into coherent words.

Using all the control I'd mastered in my decades of self-denial, I made my voice even and smooth. There was just enough air left in my lungs to speak once more, rushing through the words.

"Nevermind, then. I can see that it's impossible. Thank you so much for your help."

I spun and launched myself from the room, trying not to feel the warm-blooded heat of the girl's body as I passed within inches of it.

I didn't stop until I was in my car, moving too fast the entire way there. Most of the humans had cleared out already, so there weren't a lot of witnesses. I heard a sophomore, D.J. Garrett, notice, and then disregard…

Where did Cullen come from—it was like he just came out of thin air… There I go, with the imagination again. Mom always says…

When I slid into my Volvo, the others were already there. I tried to control my breathing, but I was gasping at the fresh air like I'd been suffocated.

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"Edward?" Alice asked, alarm in her voice.

I just shook my head at her.

"What the hell happened to you?" Emmett demanded, distracted, for the moment, from the fact that Jasper was not in the mood for his rematch.

Instead of answering, I threw the car into reverse. I had to get out of this lot before Bella Swan could follow me here, too. My own person demon, haunting me… I swung the car around and accelerated. I hit forty before I was on the road. On the road, I hit seventy before I made the corner.

Without looking, I knew that Emmett, Rosalie and Jasper had all turned to stare at Alice. She shrugged. She couldn't see what had passed, only what was coming.

She looked ahead for me now. We both processed what she saw in her head, and we were both surprised.

"You're leaving?" she whispered.

The others stared at me now.

"Am I?" I hissed through my teeth.

She saw it then, as my resolve wavered and another choice spun my future in a darker direction.

"Oh."

Bella Swan, dead. My eyes, glowing crimson with fresh blood. The search that would follow. The careful time we would wait before it was safe for us to pull out and start again…

"Oh," she said again. The picture grew more specific. I saw the inside of Chief Swan's house for the first time, saw Bella in a small kitchen with the yellow cupboards, her back to me as I stalked her from the shadows…let the scent pull me toward her…

"Stop!" I groaned, not able to bear more.

"Sorry," she whispered, her eyes wide.

The monster rejoiced.

And the vision in her head shifted again. An empty highway at night, the trees beside it coated in snow, flashing by at almost two hundred miles per hour.

"I'll miss you," she said. "No matter how short a time you're gone."

Emmett and Rosalie exchanged an apprehensive glance.

We were almost to the turn off onto the long drive that led to our home.

"Drop us here," Alice instructed. "You should tell Carlisle yourself."

I nodded, and the car squealed to a sudden stop.

Emmett, Rosalie and Jasper got out in silence; they would make Alice explain when I was gone. Alice touched my shoulder.

"You will do the right thing," she murmured. Not a vision this time—an order. "She's Charlie Swan's only family. It would kill him, too."

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"Yes," I said, agreeing only with the last part.

She slid out to join the others, her eyebrows pulling together in anxiety. They melted into woods, out of sight before I could turn the car around.

I accelerated back toward town, and I knew the visions in Alice's head would be flashing from dark to bright like a strobe light. As I sped back to Forks doing ninety, I wasn't sure where I was going. To say goodbye to my father? Or to embrace the monster inside me? The road flew away beneath my tires.

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